

Nyssa sylvatica - Black Tupelo, Black Gum or Sour Gum

(*Nyssaceae*)

Nyssa sylvatica is a shade tree with shining dark green summer foliage, excellent autumn color, abundant fruits (on appropriate flowering forms) that attract wildlife, and a picturesque growth habit with blocky ornamental bark at maturity. Black Tupelo is a native shade tree that is underutilized in landscapes, and is primarily known for its spectacular autumn colors.

Form

-large shade tree



FEATURES

-maturing at 40' tall x 30' wide under urban conditions, but double that in the wild
 -upright pyramidal growth habit in youth, becoming upright oval, upright horizontal, or spreading with age (often quite unpredictable in the growth habit of an individual tree)

-slow growth rate under urban conditions, but medium growth rate in native sites

Culture

-full sun to partial sun (partial shade tolerant in youth)
 -performs best in evenly moist, deep, acidic soils, but is somewhat adaptable to either wet or dry soils though it cannot be considered urban tolerant
 -propagated primarily by seeds, but stem cuttings from male trees are sometimes grafted onto seedling understock
 -Tupelo Family, with occasional leaf spot being the most common cosmetic disease; in general, no disease or pest problems of significance
 -moderately available in B&B or container form
 -alkaline pH soils should be avoided, as they cause slow growth, foliage chlorosis, and eventual decline or demise of the tree
 -the deep taproot system makes B&B transplanting somewhat risky except on very young trees, and therefore container-grown saplings are becoming more popular

Foliage

-alternate, obovate to elliptic, and lustrous dark green in summer
 -excellent autumn color, a mixture of scarlet, purple, orange, yellow, and green hues of shining foliage on the tree in autumn, slowly abscising



Flowers

-polygamo-dioecious (most trees have either staminate flowers [male, non-fruiting trees] or pistillate flowers [female, heavy fruiting trees], but

some trees have either staminate and perfect flowers [limited-fruiting trees] or pistillate and perfect flowers [heavy fruiting trees])

-whatever the floral state of the tree, the flowers are small, greenish-white, and ornamentally insignificant, appearing in May with the foliage

Fruits

-bluish-black small oblong fruits, maturing in Sept. and Oct., often profusely borne when present, and readily eaten by birds and squirrels
 -the abscised fleshy fruits (or directly correlated bird droppings under the trees) can be a liability

Twigs

-reddish brown young twigs become a smooth light gray by the second season
 -branches become densely twiggy with age and have numerous spur shoots

Trunk

-brown to dark gray, with prominent ridges broken into rectangular blocks by horizontal fissures, somewhat ornamental and eventually becoming platy with age

USAGE

Function

-specimen, focal point, or shade tree

Texture

-medium-fine texture in foliage and when bare
 -average to thick density in foliage and when bare

Assets

-consistently spectacular autumn color
 -fruits attract wildlife (for those trees that have fruits)
 -wet site or dry site tolerant
 -blocky ornamental mature bark
 -some trees have picturesque horizontal branching and a flat-topped crown with age

Liabilities

-fruit litter and associated bird droppings (for those trees that have fruits)
 -slow growth rate in most urban situations
 -irregular growth habit for some individual trees

Habitat

-Zones 3 to 9
 -Native to the Eastern U.S.



SELECTIONS

Alternates

-shade trees for excellent autumn color (*Acer rubrum*, *Acer saccharum*, *Liquidambar styraciflua*, *Quercus coccinea*, etc.)
 -trees with abundant fruits that attract wildlife (*Amelanchier*, *Carya*, *Crataegus*, *Fagus*, *Malus*, *Morus*, *Quercus*, etc.)
 -trees with a flat-topped growth habit at maturity (*Crataegus crusgalli*, *Gleditsia triacanthos* [native thorny form], etc.)

Cultivars – Variants – Related species

-the straight species is usually the only available choice, although selections should be made for forms that are alkaline soil tolerant, single color autumn color, or male (fruitless) grafted forms